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Scripture Reading Revisited:

GIVING VOICE TO BIBLICAL LITERATURE



Reading aloud is one of our most taken-for-granted performance tasks. Skilled readers know that doing the task well requires significant planning and practice.

BY BEVERLY MATIKO

Now, as though I had been deaf before, I began to hear Miss Everett's beautiful voice lingering lovingly over the cadences of the King James Bible. I had loved poetry before because of its imagery, but now I heard language as a form of music, and I waited for the succession of readings marking the liturgical year as though I were a traveler looking for familiar places along a well-traveled path.

— *The Road From Coorain*¹

This moment of epiphany for Jill Ker Conway occurs when she is a shy, awkward schoolgirl in the lower sixth form in Abbotsleigh, Australia. She and her schoolmates are seated on the gymnasium floor for morning assembly, with the teachers positioned above on a raised platform.

Ker Conway recalls that this arrangement dictated that "our eyes were usually directed at the level of the teachers' feet," an arrangement hardly conducive to inspiration.² At this point, neither the young Australian girl nor her in-



Strong readers often take their inspiration from the voice of a parent, teacher, or minister—someone who read aloud with clarity and conviction.

structors could predict that this timid student would eventually complete degrees from the University of Sydney and Harvard University. Nor could they foresee Ker Conway's eventual contributions as a distinguished scholar and writer, or her appointment as the first female president of Smith College.

As her memoir unfolds, Ker Conway names many of her teachers—some she would emulate, others merely endure. But few receive as glowing an endorsement as does Miss Everett, Scripture reader extraordinaire. Somehow Miss Everett was able to transcend the reading challenges posed

by multiple distractions and awkward distances and infuse Scripture with music that, decades later, still rang in the ears of at least one listener.

As I search in my memory for mentors who were strong readers of Scripture, several teachers come to mind. And one particular student. He was in my first speech class. In order to help them conquer their inevitable stage fright, I asked my first-year speech students to read aloud a passage from the Bible—something most of them had been doing for years in church school and Sabbath school. The results of this simple assignment were as I had expected. Some stumbled over ancient names and locations such as Peleg or Pamphylia. Some slipped up on *shewest* or *endureth* or other

unfamiliar verb forms. Some experienced false starts and lost their place as a carefully placed finger skidded on the Bible's tissue paper pages.

When it was Michael's* turn to read, however, something very different happened. Stepping up to the podium, he looked at his classmates and at me. I was seated at my evaluating post in the last row of desks where I could determine whether a speaker was using sufficient volume. Michael smiled briefly and then began to read a sizable portion of John 12. We listened as he recounted instruction from Jesus. One illustration was particularly apt for our rural Canadian setting. A kernel of wheat must fall, we were reminded, before it could bring forth more fruit. We heard counsel about walking in the light, again particularly fitting for students in Alberta. Many of us newcomers had taken to wearing sunglasses year-round, in order to adjust to the brightness of big-sky country. Michael ended his reading with the terse, sad commentary of verse

Michael's impressively high standards in mind, his example does remind me of an important biblical injunction: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might . . ." (Ecclesiastes 9:10). For those of us involved in training speakers, a substitution is certainly permissible: "Whatever your *voice* finds to do, do it with your might." We may not choose, as Michael did, to actually memorize Scripture before delivering it. But we can learn, practice, and promote a few basic principles for sharing printed material aloud that can improve the communication encounter between source (Scripture), channel (reader), and audience (our listeners).

If there is any book worthy of special attention for Christian students and educators, it is the Bible. Many of us were raised to shelve it carefully, letting no other book rest on top of it. We have followed a variety of reading schedules designed to take us systematically through the Bible in a given time period. But few of us have been coached on how best to share the Bible aloud in a public place, a task that most of us do regularly. It is difficult to imagine a divine worship service, prayer meeting, wedding, baby dedi-

How . . . can we as teachers or youth leaders help students to become more effective oral interpreters of Scripture?

37: "But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him . . ." (NKJV).³

Michael's evaluation was one of the easiest I had to fill out that day. His voice was clear. His rate was appropriate. We could distinguish the various speakers in his narrative. Michael matched his mood and tone to the content of the text. But he did one more noteworthy thing, something I hadn't assigned. Instead of reading, Michael *recited* the entire portion of Scripture that he had selected.

Later, outside of class, I asked Michael about his unusual presentation. He explained that his was a personal decision, recently made. "Whenever I am asked to do a Scripture reading," he explained, "I view it as a great privilege. Someone is asking me to be the mouthpiece for God's word. That's not a task I ever want to take lightly." Michael then explained that he studied each passage carefully and committed it to memory. When it came time to deliver the Scripture, he did so without any printed aid. His aim, he assured me, was not to show off. Far from it. He explained, "I must internalize the message before I can share it. It's not enough just to say the words. By memorizing the words and meditating on them in advance, it's as if they become written in my head and on my heart. I want the words to take root in these same places for my listeners." And so Michael turned the familiar Scripture reading into a carefully rehearsed Scripture recitation.

Basic Principles

While I haven't rewritten my speech class syllabus with

cation, baptism, funeral, or any Christian assembly where Scripture reading isn't part of the program.

Tips for Oral Interpretation

How then can we as teachers or youth leaders help students to become more effective oral interpreters of Scripture? I offer here a few tips gleaned from several decades of teaching classes in public speaking, voice and diction, and interpretive reading. Informing my observations have been many years of listening to others read Scripture aloud—some good, some not-so-good—and reading Scripture aloud myself.

Any teacher, regardless of his or her subject area, can adapt and share these suggestions with students to help them improve their techniques for Scripture reading aloud. These recommendations will work well in high school speech classes as well as in college general-education classes such as Communication Skills or Introduction to Speech. Any literature, communication, or homiletics class that has a performance component can also incorporate these recommendations. Students at the elementary and junior high level, too, can begin to master these skills.

An educator need not be a trained speech teacher to apply these suggestions. Any class in which the Bible is used will benefit from hearing that sacred text read aloud well. Outside of the formal classroom, in venues such as Pathfinders, young people's meetings, or Sabbath school, leaders will find numerous opportunities to serve as a vocal coach and use these suggestions when planning and rehearsing programs.

Because seven seems to be such a Scripture-friendly

* Names have been changed to protect the students' privacy.

The conscientious reader of Scripture will take his or her assignment as seriously as a vocalist or any other musician. Careful study of the "score" and work with a coach are invaluable parts of the process.



number, I offer seven suggestions for improving the public reading of Scripture:

1. Build in rehearsal time.

"The largest room in the world is the room for improvement!"⁴ This claim, made by speech expert Lyle V. Mayer, certainly holds true for any learned skill. Sadly, practicing a Scripture reading in advance doesn't occur to most readers. Typically, readers verify the content and location of the passage, then ask whether a specific version of the Bible is pre-

ferred. After reading the passage silently a time or two, they pronounce themselves ready to read aloud.

Imagine how successful a soloist would be if he or she just silently reviewed the printed music a time or two before performing. Even the most seasoned musician recognizes the importance of practicing aloud. Until performers actually hear themselves deliver the music, they can't be sure where challenges might surface, where extra attention might be needed.

Practicing in advance, several times, provides confidence

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that one can do the task at hand. It testifies that task is a significant one. It pays homage to the original writer or composer. If a vocalist is asked to sing a version of Scripture, such as “The Lord’s Prayer” or “The Lord Is My Shepherd,” the audience expects that rehearsal will be a prerequisite to performance. Readers of Scripture should take their task just as seriously.

2. Take the emotional temperature of the passage.

The 66 books of the Bible present us with a rich range of human emotion. We hear the psalmist raise his voice in praise and adoration, urging us to do the same “for the Lord is good.” We are repeatedly exhorted to “Sing praises to his name” (Psalm 135:3). We also hear the psalmist’s cries of fear and despair: “Out of the depths I have cried to you, O Lord; / Lord, hear my voice!” (Psalm 130:1, 2); and Elijah’s voice mocking the prophets of Baal, suggesting that perhaps their god is otherwise occupied or even vacationing (1 Kings 18:27). We listen to the passion of lovers as recorded in the Song of Solomon: “Let

choices made in Eden, a range of moods and emotions is needed.

3. Learn before you lead.

We cannot share what we do not first possess. If your wallet is empty, you can’t loan me five dollars. Similarly, if you don’t understand a piece of writing, you cannot hope to share its meaning with a listener. Simply saying the words in the right order is not sufficient. We share most fully and meaningfully when we do so from a position of knowledge and understanding. By examining the verses and chapters surrounding a selected passage, the person called on to read Scripture in public can gain and eventually communicate a fuller understanding of the text.

The first question to ask is: Who is speaking? Are the words being attributed to Jesus? Is one of the disciples speaking in his own voice? Is Queen Esther speaking in court? Then, in what genre of literature are these verses cast? By determining the type of biblical literature to be shared, the reader can determine what conventions apply. Is this a letter? Is it a song or passage of poetry? Is it the recollection of an eyewitness?

4. Practice on location.

I recently attended an impressive concert on my campus by a world-class string quartet. Only after the performance had ended did I learn from one of the event organizers that

When preparing to read Scripture aloud, it is important to determine the range of emotions represented in the passage.

him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth . . .” (1:2). Amazement can be heard in the voices of those present at the feeding of the multitude: “This is truly the Prophet who is to come into the world” (John 6:14).

When preparing to read Scripture aloud, it is important to determine the range of emotions represented in the passage. What is the dominant emotion? Is the speaker in the text offering praise, correction, condemnation, or encouragement? The reader’s voice must match the mood of the words if any sensible meaning is to be conveyed. We have all heard too many well-meaning but woefully monotone Scripture readings that offer no indication of the powerful emotions in the text. By examining the context—the verses and even chapters surrounding a selected passage—the person asked to read Scripture can best decide what mood is called for. Some passages require a variety of emotions. When there are several speakers, such as Samuel and Eli in conversation about voices in the night, or God and Adam discussing recent

the performers had become lost en route to the engagement. Instead of arriving two to three hours early to prepare and rehearse, they walked into the building just minutes before curtain time. Fortunately, the quartet was able to quickly assess this new space and adapt accordingly. Most of us, I’m sure, would have been visibly rattled. Our opening number would have included a litany of apologies.

It’s best to practice where you will be performing. The more comfortable you are with your surroundings, the more confident you can feel about your reading. Is there a podium? Does it match your height? If you are shorter than the average speaker, a small wooden box on which to stand will help you connect better with your audience. If you are taller than average, you may find that resting your manuscript on the podium is not a comfortable option. You may have to hold the piece up in order to read easily. In that case, sometimes a hard folder is helpful, as lifted pages have the tendency to droop.

What about the lighting? Is there a desk lamp on the podium? Does it work? Will you have control of the switch?

Will you be seated on the platform? Are there steps to navigate? Doors to open and close? Typically, the success of

“As a performer, your challenge is to transform the written words of literature into *behaved* words. As an oral interpreter, your responsibility is to make the words of an author live; your task is to breathe energy into each page of a selected script.”


a performance is in inverse proportion to the number of surprises. Rehearsing on location can help you anticipate and address potential problems.

5. Read from a prepared manuscript.

One of the biggest mistakes made by most public readers of Scripture is attempting to read from the Bible itself. Bible print is unusually small, and the pages are very thin. Often the print from the underneath page is partially visible. The sentences of Scripture are interrupted by verse numbers—not something people are used to encountering in other printed text. The columns and spacing are unusual,

too. All of these conditions make it more difficult to read aloud well from the Bible itself.

Your chances of effectively reading Scripture aloud will improve dramatically if you read from a prepared manuscript. Create some pages that are the size of your Bible and type your Scripture passage onto those pages (or copy and paste from an electronic version of the Scriptures). Be sure to double space. Mark up the passage for emphasis. Underline key words. Spell phonetically any words or names that may be difficult to pronounce. Slip this page into your Bible, and practice from it. When it is time to read, step up to the podium, open your Bible, and read from your per-



Andrews University student Katy Van Arsdale receives pointers from instructor Beverly Matiko on using a carefully prepared manuscript for Scripture reading.

formance-friendly page. Professional readers on television and radio work from very carefully crafted double- and even triple-spaced manuscripts. If the professionals adapt their text to improve communication, certainly we amateurs will benefit from following their lead.

6. Craft a brief introduction.

When you read aloud from the Bible, you're almost always reading an excerpt, a few lines from the middle of a larger work. Understanding any excerpt is easier if one has the context. "The Lord's Prayer" can take on new meaning if the audience is reminded, "Matthew follows his recording of the Beatitudes with a sample prayer from Jesus. We find this famous petition in Matthew, chapter 6, beginning with verse 9" Our hearing of the Song of Mary is enriched if we are reminded that "Following a record of the intimate conversation between Mary and Elizabeth, where the elder relative learns that the young woman is also pregnant, Luke records the lyrics to what has come to be known as Mary's Song. In verse 46 of chapter 1 we find, 'My soul magnifies the Lord'" An introduction need not be long. Identification of the setting, the speaker, the original audience, and the location of the passage in the Bible can usually be accomplished in just one sentence.

7. Cite your source twice.

Even if the reference for the passage you are reading is listed in the printed program, courtesy dictates that you cite your source. A Bible verse is like a telephone number or address. It consists of a series of numbers in a specific order. These numbers enable the listeners to reach your shared destination and make the desired connection. Few people can grasp a series of numbers in just one hearing. For that reason, it's helpful to include the numbers twice in an introduction, typically at the beginning and then at the end. Here is an example:

"Hebrews 12 follows a long recitation of accomplishments enacted by 'faith.' In this epistle, Paul advises his listeners on how best to honor this legacy. Hebrews 12: 'Therefore we also; since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.' . . ."

It is not necessary to say "verse 1," since this can be assumed as the starting place. If you are starting elsewhere in the text, you can say, "beginning with verse 11." You don't need to tell the audience your ending point. Your starting point is the only information they will need to locate the passage.

By taking the reading of Scripture seriously and by applying basic performance principles to this sacred task, the reader will find that "the words of my mouth / and the meditation of my heart," are "acceptable" in God's sight, to quote the Psalmist (Psalm 19:14). The words may even move beyond acceptable to enjoyable, enlightening, and en-

livening. Writing in *Ministry*, Emily Moore recalls the advice of one of her English professors regarding the reading of Scripture. Although addressing future pastors, the professor's words apply to anyone invited to share Scripture aloud: "Don't neglect reading the Bible to your people; but never go into your pulpit without practicing the Scripture you've chosen. If you read it well, you will be giving your audience two sermons."⁵

Teri and Michael Gamble, authors of *Literature Alive! The Art of Oral Interpretation*, remind us that "As a performer, your challenge is to transform the written words of literature into *behaved* words. As an oral interpreter, your responsibility is to make the words of an author live; your task is to breathe energy into each page of a selected script." These same writers then pose the question, "How can you meet these responsibilities?"⁶

One of my second-language students in a voice and diction class recently offered one answer to this question: "Joy,"* I prodded, following a particularly moving reading, "would you tell the class how much you practiced for this final performance?" She looked down shyly at her prepared manuscript—a short excerpt from Mitch Albom's tribute to his professor, *Tuesdays With Morrie*. She thought for a few seconds, then volunteered, "Thirty times, I think. Or maybe 31. I lost count. Professor, was it sufficient?"

The awestruck looks on the faces of her classmates provided Joy with the affirmation she was seeking. While few of us—or our students—are likely to log that many practices for the reading of any text, secular or sacred, it is good to remember that a few well-chosen, well-rehearsed, well-delivered words can speak volumes. And if those chosen words come from Holy Scripture, what an added privilege it is to be the doers or the receivers of those words. ✍

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